

CONFERENCE COVERAGE: CANADIAN HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION:

Archives Section

University of Alberta, Calgary, June, 1968

"ORAL HISTORY RESEARCH IN CANADA"

Speakers: W. C. Mattie (Glenbow Foundation) and  
Professor Victor Hoar (University of Western Ontario)

Wes Mattie spoke first, and explained that although he was now with the Glenbow Foundation, his brief was to deal with projects undertaken by the Provincial Archives of Alberta in Edmonton while he was on the staff there as the person mainly responsible for oral history. He sketched the progress of the government's interest in the programme since its early days in 1957 when the first recordings were made by a Cabinet Minister, the Honorable Russell Patrick. His work was continued by the staff of the Tourist Bureau who interviewed a sample of homesteaders from the various regions of the Province. Little attempt was made to control the interview apart from establishing reasons for settlement and other basic information. It was found that motives for decision were often unexpected, and not only in the field of homesteading. For example, the dinosaurs at Calgary Zoo were not inspired by their neighbouring graveyard in the Drumheller badlands, but by a horror movie seen by the sculptor in the 1930's, in which these monsters became masters of the world! An old Vaudeville actor made a fine subject for interview, and gave an oldtime performance as well.

There were disappointments, of course, notably the daughter of the famous Indian guide and interpreter, Peter Erasmus. To quote Mr. Mattie, "She was almost totally deaf, she spoke Cree much better than English, and she had never lived with her famous father". In 1967, the speaker rode with a party of Kinsmen along the old Edson-Grande Prairie Trail, a thirteen-day ride over 260 miles of route which had not been used since 1916 and still remained largely unmapped. On this occasion, the oral research was carried out after the ride, with the interviewer well equipped with experience and the right kind of questions, besides several early photographs of the trail which he used as "primers", to start his subjects talking. An emergency programme which required the cataloguing of 7,000 photographs in the Pollard collection was undertaken through an extended series of interviews with Harry Pollard, the photographer, who was at that time in poor health.

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Use was also made of questionnaires prepared by the Saskatchewan Archives for the interviewing of old-timers, and an outsider, not on the staff of the Provincial Archives, was employed to talk to friends and acquaintances within her own social milieu. An experienced journalist and broadcaster and the daughter of a well-known Edmonton newspaper publisher, she had been close to prominent people and events in Edmonton for most of her life.

On the matter of technique, Mr. Mattie stressed that no interviewer can be over-prepared, and the rapport between him and the subject is of the utmost importance. **Above all, it is essential** that all those taking part in an interview should be relaxed and comfortable and not feel bothered by the apparatus.

He concluded with some remarks on programmes which he would have followed up had he not moved to Calgary. He would like to have continued his interviews with bush pilots which he made over a period of a day and a half on the occasion of a cairn unveiling ceremony, when he flew up to Whitehorse with the pilots and talked to them long into the night, with some remarkably candid results. He again rode on another trail with the Kinsmen, this time to the Athabasca Landing, and there was follow-up to be done there too. He would liked to have made an oral survey of all those politicians connected with the famous 1935 provincial election in Alberta when the Social Credit government was first returned to power.

Professor Victor Hoar prefaced his talk with a quotation from James Russell Lowell: "Blessed are they that have nothing to say and resist the temptation to say it", and suggested it as a slogan for those in the field. He then outlined Philip Crowell's categories of oral history as follows:

1. Reminiscences by a person about his life or an episode in it.
2. The biography of a person contributed by several people.
3. Significant episodes described by participants.

Professor Hoar himself added a fourth category in which he is particularly interested: a record of the contemporary, continuing process of events.

Professor Hoar indicated that in the U.S.A. there were over one hundred major programmes in progress at the present time, and that the oldest agency engaged in this work, namely that on the campus of Columbia University, produced a catalogue in 1965 which contained 1,345 entries of recorded "memoirs", containing from 20 to over 1,000 pages each. It is estimated that one taped hour of interview transcribes to 23 to 24 double-spaced typed pages.

Certain guidelines should be followed by all those engaged in the work. There should be a deposit agreement drawn up by a legal officer; Professor Hoar uses an adaptation of that in use at Columbia. The offer of this kind of legal protection may result in a more candid account, but the interviewer should be wary of the laws of libel. Questions and comment should be free from jargon as much as possible since this may confuse later research, and will certainly be difficult for the transcriber and typist. Once the tape has been transcribed, the transcript should be "tidied" but no more, and a copy of this transcript returned to the interviewee for his editing. Massive rewriting should, however, be discouraged. What is required is clarity with supplementary comment, if necessary. Whether or not the recording is kept will depend partly on the importance of the person being interviewed and partly on the financial situation. A number of programmes re-use all their tapes, but it is probably advisable to keep the originals as long as possible. Professor Hoar emphasized that his university was the custodian and trustee of the tapes in his possession, and that once the corrected transcript was returned by the interviewee, then a corrected copy would be retained by the interviewee who could copyright it if he wished. In any case, the account remained the property of the person being interviewed.

The costs of an oral history programme can be rather alarming and an average across the States at present runs around \$7 a page transcript in its final form. This includes overheads of all kinds, binding, and traveling expenses, and the payment of interviewers. Columbia hires all interviewers at between \$18 and \$27 per taped hour. Typists receive \$18 per taped hour, but it must be remembered that their work demands a very meticulous approach. Of Columbia's five typists, four are M.A.s and the fifth is a Ph.D. The budget for the Columbia University office is \$45,000 for a staff of two to three. Over the past ten years, the output of this office has averaged around 570 taped hours a year.

Western's programme is not quite a year old and during last winter, 17 interviews were completed. The principal programmes which involve the speaker at present include the Dieppe operation of the Second World War; the Great Depression; Canadian authors; the history of Western University. An oral history and "character study" of the Toronto Press is also being undertaken, subsidized by the Canada Council.

Professor Hoar recommended that a workshop should be set up to examine standards and explore the complexities of copyright, technique, etc.; and that there should be a consortium of those engaged in oral history in Canada to exchange materials, and so avoid duplication. Members might also be able to carry out

assignments for other members within their own areas. Among national programmes which might be undertaken, there could well be the life and times of Pearson and Diefenbaker, a history of the C.C.F., and a study of the production of one of the plays at Stratford as part of the contemporary record. Speaking conversationally, Professor Hoar concluded with these words which sum up the problems and fascinations of the medium;

"There is something unique about interviewing veterans of any kind of historical experience, because what often results is a very moving account. I have interviewed Canadian volunteers in the Spanish Civil War who had not been approached by anyone in the thirty odd years since they'd come back from Spain. For some of them it was a very powerful, almost overwhelming emotional experience to be interviewed. Mac Reynolds, the man who started it for the C.B.C., and I were quite often ourselves deeply touched by what we were being told, and of course by the men themselves, who were often under great strain. But how else would we have gotten the material?

"I have used a tape recorder to interview men who took part on the 'On to Ottawa Trek' for a book I want to begin next year; and there too, how else would you have gotten the material? I interviewed two men who were on the delegation of trekkers that met with R. B. Bennett in Ottawa. One of them said that when the eight of them were ushered into the room, their leader was dressed in overalls, his badge of honor, and there was iron-heeled Bennett standing by his desk with all of his ministers lined up behind him, who never said a word; there were drapes from the ceiling to the floor around the room and from the bottom of the drapes, you could see the boots of R.C.M.P. officers sticking out. Well, this is a wonderful story. But is it true? I don't know. When I come to work on that particular episode, I will have to try to find a description someplace of the office, the chambers in which these men were received, and see if there were drapes hanging from the floor to the ceiling. I don't know if there were R.C.M.P. officers or not but perhaps there were.

"Some of you may know that that particular trek ended in a violent riot in Regina in which a policeman was killed. The policeman's assailant was never caught. I was interviewing a little man in a hotel room in Vancouver last year and we were talking about the killing and I said, 'Did you see it', and he said, 'Oh, yes'.

And I said, 'Do you know who did it', and he said, 'Yes'; and we stopped the tape recorder, and we thought silently, and we said, 'Well, we'd better leave that alone'. I didn't know what would happen if he gave me a name or what the statutes are about that. I was a little bit scared there for a moment, so was he.

"There are problems, again, with the memory in interviewing this sort of man. You can interview a man about his adventures in Spain, let's say for two hours solid, and know at the end that you've got maybe one line of information out of the whole interview because he's so vague and has forgotten so much. Sometimes, you can get some men who seem remarkably precise in their recollection, and then you start checking things and find out that they have made up the story, and persuaded themselves that this is what happened, and thirty years later now they believe it. **This is a common feeling that probably all of us have from time to time.** I can tell some great war stories myself without ever having lived them.

"I find an occasional fellow, a very honest and sincere man who wants to help me, so I will say, 'Do you remember this thing that happened', and he will say, 'Oh, yes', and he will tell me a story; and I've gotten so used to talking with this sort of person that I know that he is not giving me an eyewitness account. He may have been there, but he doesn't remember anything about it. He is shaping a story which he knows is reasonably true from books he has read, from accounts from other men, but it's not his own account. **He created the story** himself and offers it to me, and I can usually tell by the way he's telling it that he can't remember, and he's a bit embarrassed, and he's trying to help me. **He wants** to help me so he's making up a thing that is quite "accurate" except that it's not what he actually saw. It's what he thought he saw or what he thinks I want him to have thought that he saw.

"This is an intriguing business. For some reason, people who engage in oral history are zealots, they are as passionate in their devotion as Southern Baptists are and, at times, as glassy-eyed. I don't want to bamboozle any archivist or any historian into thinking that it is the Second Coming, as someone once said. It isn't. **It is a reasonably new technique** because of the use of the tape recorder of course, but I think it can be a very helpful one; and while it seems to be an expensive technique, I believe the \$7.00 a page figure that I

cited can be greatly reduced. I do nearly all the interviewing myself, although in the Toronto Press project, I hope to be able to engage a freelance interviewer or perhaps a graduate student, someone who is good at interviewing, personable, and knows his stuff, and who can take on some of that work for me. I would pay that person of course. I think that we would all want to hire interviewers from time to time for special projects to get the experts who have access to the respondent and perhaps know him and know something about the subject already, so that they can go right in to the work in a much better fashion than an archivist who would have to prepare himself."

NOTE: Attention is drawn to A Bibliography on Oral History by D. J. Schippers and A. Tusler, 1967, being Miscellaneous Publications Number 1 of the Oral History Association.

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Canadian Film Archives under the supervision of Mr. Bill Gallaway. A good many Canadian archives have extensive picture collections, but few, to my knowledge, have yet begun to collect moving film in sizeable quantities.

Despite the interest in the general workshops the sessions on purely Canadian subjects seemed to be the liveliest and most bracing of the whole conference. (Or is this parochialism or chauvanism or whatever?) They included "French Canada - The Archival Situation" and "Developments in Canadian Business Archives".

Quebec boasts the motto "Je me souviens", but the panelists and the audience all sadly agreed, without dissent, that the archival situation in Quebec, if not all French Canada, is generally deplorable. Those present at the workshop were also treated to an exposition of M. Laurier Lapierre's somewhat novel archival theories.

The panel on Canadian Business Archives chaired by Mr. James C. Bonar opened one of the first general public discussions of this significant and hitherto untilled field. It was unfortunate that Willard Ireland, Provincial Archivist of British Columbia, was unable to be present to deliver his scheduled paper. However, John Archer of Queen's University ably adapted his remarks to survey the situation as a whole, and stimulated what became the liveliest discussion I heard during the conference; a discussion which may indeed be

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